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THE IMPACT OF FUNDING MINI-PROJECTS IN FOSTERING COLLABORATION AND PROFESSIONAL GROWTH.

by

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INTRODUCTION

Teacher professional development can be accomplished in many ways. The traditional forms used by boards are to involve teachers in workshops and skills training sessions. Much has been written about the need for alternative forms of professional development activities for teachers which are "multi-faceted, representing an array of structures, designs, and processes that can be matched to particular learning outcomes" (Levine & Broude, 1989). In addition, collaboration and cooperation is increasingly being promoted as an effective learning strategy for adults (Glatthorn, 1987; Pacquetter, 1987).

The method described in this paper, providing mini-grants, was to empower teachers to become involved in self-initiated professional development activities. Educators identified personal or school needs and were funded for a grant to carry out their projects in collaboration with a partner.

This paper reports findings from a study of the effect of mini-grants as a form of professional development. Specifically, the impact of the projects on fostering collaboration and professional growth was explored. As well, the nature of the collaboration, the conditions supporting and working against collaboration, and the impact of involvement in the projects on teachers, schools, and students were investigated. A primary reason for the study was to assess the success of the initial projects and to determine if the Learning Consortium should continue providing mini-grants.

The Learning Consortium and Mini-Project Program

The Learning Consortium is a university-school board partnership of six member organizations; two universities and four school boards in the

greater Toronto area.[1] These organizations have joined forces to coordinate activities that promote both teacher development and school improvement at the preservice, induction, and inservice levels. Joint program initiatives have included summer institutes, workshops, conferences, and teacher education programs that focus on improving instruction and fostering collaboration.

In 1991, the Learning Consortium introduced the "Mini Project Program." This program funded projects to a maximum of $1,500.00 per project. Applicants for funding had to describe the nature of the project, anticipate how it would support professional growth and collaboration, identify a timeline, and project a budget. The project had to involve more than one member of the Consortium (see application form in Appendix A). In the first year, 1991-92, ten projects were selected for funding.

METHODOLOGY

A follow-up study on all ten projects was conducted in the spring of 1992. Three data sources were used to collect information on the projects: questionnaires, interviews, and document analysis. Questionnaires were sent to all twenty-one project coordinators who initiated the ten projects.[2] Responses were received from all ten projects. In some cases both project coordinators responded independently; in others a collaborative joint response was given.

After an initial analysis was done of the questionnaire data, six projects were identified for follow-up interviews. The purpose of the telephone interviews was to explore further questions and issues that emerged from the questionnaire responses. These included one exceptional project, two rated as good, the only project rated at moderately successful, one

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1Current members include the Faculty of Education at the University of Toronto, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, Durham Board of Education, Halton Board of Education, North York Board of Education, and Scarborough Board of Education.

2All projects had two coordinators; one in each of the partner organizations. One project had three contact persons.

project where a key player changed during the project and one where the responses on the questionnaire were confusing. The third data source was to examine the original proposals submitted for funding which defined the expectations and goals for each project, as well as the interim progress reports.

Data were analyzed independently by each author. This involved independent reading, review, and analysis. Joint analysis resulted in the identification of common themes and patterns and grouping of individual responses. Findings are summarized in the following section.

FINDINGS

First, we describe the kinds of projects, the rationale for the initiatives, and the way the funds were used. Then, we focus on the extent and nature of collaboration between the partners; we discuss the obstacles or barriers to collaboration as well as those factors that contributed to the success of the joint ventures. Next, we report on the benefits and impact of the projects on teacher development, school improvement, and student learning. Specifically, we address the question of the cross-board/cross-organizational collaboration. Finally, evaluation of the projects and follow-up activities are discussed, and major participant learnings are summarized.

Kinds of Projects: Initiation and Use of Funds

Three kinds of projects were initiated with the mini-grant funds. As shown in Table I, three projects focused on responding to Ministry of Education restructuring initiatives (transition years and technologies), four focused on instructional strategies (mainly cooperative learning), and the remaining three were curriculum development initiatives. Two projects focused on both curriculum development and instructional strategies. (See Appendix A for a brief description of each of the ten projects.)

Eight of the projects involved high schools and two were conducted at elementary schools. Projects were initiated in response to a school identified need, ministry policy directions, or were a natural progression from a previous project. The majority of the projects were proposed by teachers, while others were initiated by coordinators or consultants, department heads, and faculty members.

Use of Funds

Most projects involved one of the following professional development activities: planning meetings, visitations or exchanges, workshops, and retreats. Mini-grant funds were used to support these learning events. Because of the nature of the cross-partner collaboration, most projects involved travel expenses for meetings and visitations. Monies were also used to purchase books, programs, materials and equipment to support curriculum and instructional initiatives.

Half of the respondents (5 of 10 projects) reported that they would not have initiated or implemented their projects without the support of Learning Consortium funding. The other five stated that they would not have pursued professional development activities to the extent or degree that they did had they not received the incentive monies. One stated, "The funding made it more attractive and gave us incentive". Another responded, "We likely would have done the project, but I'm not sure the commitment would have been so high. The mini-grant increased the investment of both parties". Also, "The funding gave the project legitimacy". Two of the projects received additional supplementary funding from local sources.

Table I: Kinds of Projects

Ministry Initiatives

- Twinning of Dunbarton High School and White Oaks Secondary School (transition years)
- Technology in Primary and Junior Science
- Teacher Exchange: Ajax High School and York Mills Collegiate Institute (transition years)

Instructional Strategies

- Durham-Halton Cooperative Learning Exchange
- Math and Cooperative Learning
- Active Learning*
- Student Culture and Learning Style

Curriculum Development

- Basic Level Mathematics
- Social Skills Program
- Active Learning*
- Student Culture and Learning Style

* These projects involved both curriculum development and instructional strategies.

Collaboration: Barriers and Conditions of Support

The main condition of funding was that the project had to involve collaboration between Learning Consortium partners, that is, across board or faculty/board. A number of obstacles and barriers made collaboration more difficult, while other factors or conditions supported the joint endeavours. Participants reported on the ways they promoted collaboration and maintained momentum.

Coordination, time, and distance were identified as the main barriers to collaboration. Difficulty in scheduling meetings and coordinating activities between the partners were identified most often as obstacles to collaboration. Time was a second major barrier. Involvement in a mini-project required a time commitment after school hours. The distance between partners was also an obstacle as it contributed to the time problem. In one case, the scope of the project was too large for the money, time, and energy that was available. Two projects encountered administrator resistance and the loss of a key player affected collaboration in another project.

Many factors and conditions were identified as supporting collaboration. Most important was the Learning Consortium mini-grant funding. As stated earlier, half of the projects would not have been initiated without the monies. Supportive colleagues and supportive administration were identified as important to the collaborative efforts. Respondents reported that their colleagues were "extremely cooperative ... willing to risk ... supportive ... enthusiastic." The existence of collaborative structures or conditions in the school made cross-school/cross-organizational projects less difficult. A common need, goal, or problem provided a purpose and a focus for the collaborative projects.

Project coordinators were key in promoting collaboration and maintaining momentum. They did three things to promote collaboration: they brought people together in variety of settings (workshops, meetings, retreats, visitations); they promoted the sharing of resources, materials, and ideas; and they made a concerted effort to maintain frequent and regular contact

with their partner. Defining a timeframe and involving a critical mass of teachers in the projects also contributed to maintaining momentum. Positive student response to teachers efforts was also important.

Benefits and Impact

The benefits of collaboration seemed to far outweigh the disadvantages and obstacles that were encountered. Involvement in collaborative projects provided opportunities for both teacher development and school improvement. The impact on students was, in most cases, more indirect. As well, participants felt that the cross board/organization collaboration was very beneficial.

Teachers reported that they learned new ideas and gained new understandings about their work, increased their repertoire of teaching strategies and processes, and were exposed to new materials and resources. Meeting with other educators facing similar problems and challenges served two functions. They reported feeling reassurance and reinforcement for what they were already doing and many reported that they felt more confidence about the directions they were taking as a result of learning new skills and ideas. Second, many expressed that they had developed new professional contacts through the project which would result in further networking, problem solving and sharing.

Involvement in a mini- project also promoted cooperation and collaboration within schools. In each project, a number of teachers in a school were involved and in some cases more than one department participated. The project gave them a structure for cooperating and resulted in more in-school sharing and strengthened collegial relationships. In two cases, school visitations and exchanges resulted in changes in school structures. Examples cited included: new uses of space, ways of grouping students, and the formation of program planning teams. Finally, some made reference to increased capabilities and felt they had learned a planning process that would help in future initiatives.

The impact of the projects on student learning was varied and in some cases it is too early to assess. Direct impact on student learning was related to the nature of the project. Three projects had a direct impact because the focus was on a particular curriculum (i.e., social skills, problem solving, decision-making, technology) or instructional strategy (cooperative learning). Other projects had an indirect impact as the teachers reported making changes in their classrooms with the intent to improve student learning opportunities. Some projects were not directly related to classroom instruction.

Respondents felt there were definite benefits to cross-school/organizational collaboration. They explained that involvement in the project gave them a "broader perspective on education" and wider exposure to ideas and possibilities. A number of people reported that the experience increased their respect for their colleagues and their understanding of the "other realities" of different work cultures. In addition, people made reference to their role in learning from and helping each other to learn; they saw themselves as teacher leaders. Most schools acquired additional material resources through the projects.

Follow-up

The projects proved to be the impetus for a host of other activities and possibilities. In all but one case, people reported plans for follow-up, extensions, and spin-offs from the original project. Many said they will continue to network and share with their partner school or contact. Some spoke about plans for extending their curriculum and instructional strategies in other grades or departments in their school. Several reported a school-wide increase in interest and activity that is collaborative. Others reported that they will seek out further opportunities for collaboration within the school and with other partners. A number expressed an interest in applying for another mini-grant to organize an exchange with a different school in a new board.

Evaluation and Success of the Projects

Nine of the ten projects were judged to have been successful. One was rated as "exceptionally successful", seven as "highly successful", and one was assessed as "good". The tenth project seemed to never have gotten off the ground and was only rated as "moderately successful." In general, people felt that participating in a collaborative project was a positive learning experience, resulting in significant sharing of ideas about teaching, helping participants establish valuable contacts, and providing opportunities for personal and professional growth. The project was seen as an important initiating activity (to cooperative learning) in one school, and as a reinforcing activity for the same innovation in the partner school. It was seen as "creating a spark" for looking at more ways of collaborating in another school.

Most of the project evaluations were informal. Assessment was based on participant discussion, verbal feedback, and comments with teachers, and workshop evaluations. One staff was more systematically collecting data through a survey to staff and students, as well as through reflective journal summaries. This evaluation was not completed at the time of data collection. The completion of the questionnaire for this study was seen as the evaluation for a number of the projects.

Major Learnings

When asked, "What did you learn from this experience that can be shared with other educators?" the following kinds of responses were received:

- ways to collaborate
- the power of collegial learning
- teaching strategies
- school structures

- about resource materials
- professional development strategies (peer coaching, team planning strategies, trainer of trainers model, videotaping)
- about the range of exciting initiatives in Ontario schools.

CONCLUSIONS

The "Mini-Project Program" proved to be a very successful way of promoting collaboration and professional development. A diverse range and variety of learning activities were initiated with the incentive of a small grant in support of self-initiated projects. There was a lot of "bang for a few bucks". The mini-grant funding seemed to fuel enthusiasm and generate a great deal of focused energy for learning. Providing mini-grants seems to be a good investment of professional development monies.

The program served to promote the mandate of The Learning Consortium in encouraging teacher development and school improvement. Individuals gained skills and knowledge about instructional strategies, learned alternative ways for organizing curriculum, and acquired new resources and materials. In most cases participation in the projects also resulted in changes to school structures and/or interaction patterns. in a few projects, students benefited directly in learning new skills.

Collaboration and cooperation within schools and between organizations were enhanced through participation in the projects. Participants reported increased sharing and collegiality between teachers and departments in their schools. Sharing and networking with other colleagues was also facilitated through the joint endeavours. Cross-board/cross organizational collaboration added a broader perspective to consideration of changes in classrooms and in school structures.

RECOMMENDATIONS

We offer suggestions and recommendations for practitioners considering funding mini-projects, for The Learning Consortium and for future

research. Practitioners initiating and implementing professional development projects are advised:

- to select projects that are focused, realistic, and achievable with the available resources
- to identify a timeframe for the projects
- to plan to document the project for sharing
- to evaluate the project in some formal way

The Learning Consortium should:

- continue funding mini-grants that involve collaboration between Consortium partners
- advertise more broadly that funds are available for collaborative teacher development and school improvement projects between partners
- consider some way for sharing the results of the projects (such as a newsletter)
- consider giving successful projects high priority for extensions or round-two grants
- require that projects be formally evaluated by participants

Future research on mini-grants could address some of the following questions:

- How many people were directly involved in the projects? This could assess the extent of the impact of the monies spent.
- What follow-up activities, spin-offs, or extensions emerge from the initial project?
- How did teachers feel about being empowered to self-initiate programs? Specifically to look at such factors as motivation, trust, and professionalism.
- To what degree was the funding the motivator in initiating the project? Would the project have been done without the monies being available?

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APPENDIX A: MINI-GRANT APPLICATION FORM
THE LEARNING CONSORTIUM
MINI-PROJECTS

The Learning Consortium is a partnership of the Durham Board of Education, the Halton Board of Education, the North York Board of Education, the Scarborough Board of Education, the Faculty of Education at the University of Toronto, and the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. These organizations have joined forces to work on common goals in teacher development and school improvement. Joint program initiatives at the preservice, induction and inservice levels have included Summer Institutes in cooperative learning and peer coaching, workshop series, newsletters, and conferences. Our efforts focus on improving instruction and fostering collaboration, as well as understanding the educational change process.

In 1990-91, the Consortium introduced a program of mini-grants to foster collaboration among those in the six Learning Consortium organizations. A number of joint projects were funded. These projects proved to be most successful. As a result the Consortium now invites further applications for grants.

Purpose: To support ongoing professional growth and to encourage collaboration among personnel in the six Consortium organizations.

Amount: Up to $1500 per project.

Criteria: Projects must foster professional growth and incorporate board/board or board/university linkages.

Eligibility: Any educator from a Consortium organization, but must apply with someone else from another board, from FEUT, or from OISE.

To Apply: Complete the attached application form. Be sure to indicate how your proposal supports professional growth and links more than one Consortium organization (at least two Consortium boards, or a school board and FEUT or OISE).

Deadline for Applications: April 3,1992. You will be notified by May 1 about whether your project is funded.

Examples of the kinds of project that might be funded (in all cases, remember that there has to be a board/board, or board/FEUT or board/OISE group):

- meetings of a board/board Special Interest Group, such as Science teachers interested in cooperative learning.
- a cross-board study group to discuss research in an area of mutual interest, such as meeting developmental needs of early adolescents.
- a pilot collaborative research project, such as two teachers from different boards working together to document how social patterns change in their classrooms with the use of cooperative learning.
- planning of a professional development session or series led by a cross-board or board- FEUT team, and involving participants from more than one Consortium partner/organization.
- two consultants from different boards working together to develop professional development materials that could be used in all Consortium organizations.
- development of curriculum materials, such as adaptations of current materials to suit new teaching methods.
- funding for a school team to go to schools in other boards to share something unique they have developed.

Mini-Grant Application

Project Title: _____

Project Team:

Name _____ **Phone** _____

Brd./Org. _____ **School** _____

Name _____ **Phone** _____

Brd./Org. _____ **School** _____

Names of other members of your team: _____

1. **What do you propose to do?** (Outline rationale, purpose, and the activities you plan to carry out.)

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

2. **How will this activity support professional growth and collaboration among Consortium organizations?**

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

3. **How does your activity link people across boards and/or universities?**

_____

_____

_____

_____

Please turn over

4. **What resources/finances do you require?** (Indicate costs such as travel, materials, release time.)

_____

_____

_____

_____

5. **How will you evaluate your activity?** (For example participant evaluations.)

_____

_____

_____

6. **When do you plan to begin?**

_____

7. **What is the time line for your proposed activity?** (List tasks and dates, completion dates.)

_____

_____

_____

_____

8. **How do you plan to report your project?** (e.g. a written report or description, notes from a meeting, a videotape etc.)

_____

_____

_____

9. **Do you propose to do any follow-up activity?**

_____

_____

_____

Application Deadlines: April 3,1992. You will be notified by May 3 about whether your project is funded.

Please send to the appropriate person in your organization: Durham--Norm Green; Halton--Gayle Rekrut; North York--Erika Rimkus; Scarborough-- Peter Lipman; OISE--Andy Hargreaves; FEUT--Anne Millar.

For further information, call Ethne Cullen, Learning Consortium Coordinator, 978-6812 or your Pla Board representative.

APPENDIX B: DESCRIPTIONS OF MINI-GRANT PROJECTS

MINISTRY INITIATIVES

Preparing for the Transition Years: Twinning of Dunbarton High School and White Oaks Secondary School. ($1500)

This project involved teacher visitations and meetings to co-plan, share, and assess together inservice ideas, curriculum delivery, and school organization for implementing transition years policy directives. The purpose was to share and build on each school's experiences and strengths and to share effective strategies that work. *Project Coordinators*: Nancy Syer, white Oaks Secondary School (Halton) and M.Shea and L. Parr Dunbarton High School (Durham).

Technology in Primary and Junior Science ($1500)

The purpose of this project was to explore information and resources available to support science and technology in three K-grade 6 classrooms and to provide professional development for identified staff members. It was initiated in response to the Ministry Restructuring Initiative identifying technology in education as an essential component for preparing students for the future. A committee was formed to research information and to develop a series of workshops utilizing a "train the trainer model". *Project Coordinators*: Brian Coulson (Dufferin-Peel RCSSB)and Stanley Percival (Halton).

INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

Mathematics Teacher Exchange ($1500)

This project involved interschool teacher visits to explore and share effective classroom strategies. Teachers from the mathematics department at York Mills Collegiate spent time observing mathematics teachers at Ajax High School. In turn, the Ajax mathematics teachers visited York Mills to conduct mathematics lessons using cooperative learning techniques. *Project Coordinators*: Vera Davidson, York Mills C.I. (North York) and Neil Hodgson, Ajax High School (Durham).

Cooperative Learning Exchange ($1500)

A team of teachers and administrators from Brock High School collaborated with a team from Georgetown High School in order to share cooperative learning strategies. Two visits were made by Brock High School teachers from the history and business departments. During the first visit, Brock teachers used the model to teach lessons to Georgetown students in the areas of law, data processing, and French. In a return visit, Georgetown teachers visited Brock to observe, teach, and attend a cooperative learning luncheon. *Project Coordinators:* Gloria Woodside, Brock High School (Durham) and Betty Tamas, Georgetown High School (Halton).

Mathematics and Cooperative Learning ($1500)

Using a workshop format, project coordinators worked with teachers at the intermediate level to explore strategies for teaching math more effectively. These strategies included principles of cooperative learning, the use of manipulatives, and individual and group investigations about math concepts. Six half-day workshops were conducted; three for grade seven teachers and three for grade eight teachers at Lawrence Heights Middle School. Sandy Folk also provided one-on-one coaching for many of the teachers. *Project Coordinators*: Sandy Folk (Faculty of Education, University of Toronto) and Alex Walder, Lawrence Heights Middle School (North York).

Active Learning ($1500)

This project was a collaboration between Frontenac Primary School and the Faculty of Education at the University of Toronto. The focus of the project was planning and implementation of a holistic theme unit. The project involved a faculty member, six student teachers from the faculty and the entire Frontenac staff. Inservice on the integration of curriculum, the writing program, and instructional strategies were part of the project. The school was restructured into teams to accommodate this program. *Project coordinators:* Carol Rolheiser-Bennett (Faculty of Education, University of Toronto) and Eleanor Adams, Frontenac P. S. (Halton).

Student Culture and Learning Style ($1500)

The focus of this research project was to identify cultural groups and to investigate effective teaching strategies for specific groups. Questions also addressed what strategies did not work and why. The project involved a survey of teachers about courses, cultural groups, and teaching strategies. *Project Coordinators*: Ray Bowers, Bathhurst Heights Secondary School (North York), Don Galbraith (Faculty of Education, University of Toronto), and Malisa Mezenberg, Loyola Catholic Secondary School (Dufferin-Peel)

CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT / IMPLEMENTATION

Basic Level Mathematics ($1500)

This was a curriculum writing project. A team of educators worked during the summer to develop a detailed course outline and materials for MTW3B and MTW4B mathematics programs. The team submitted worksheets, hands-on activities, classroom motivational ideas, suggested teaching and evaluation strategies, and unit themes. The mini-grant allowed a Halton mathematics educator to join a Dufferin-Peel writing team during the summer of 1991. Follow-up workshops on the programs were subsequently planned. *Project Coordinators:* Walter Curran, (Dufferin-Peel RCSSB) and Chris Dearling, (Halton).

Social Skills Program ($1500)

The purpose of this project was to improve social skills among grade 3-4 students. The project involved a visit by 15 teachers and educational assistants from Sir John A. McDonald School to Bayview School to observe a social skills program that was already established. In addition, Bayview staff conducted two inservice sessions for teachers at Sir John A. McDonald. Approximately 120 students were involved in the six-week program that was subsequently implemented at the school. *Project Coordinators*: Neil Simpson, Sir John A. McDonald School, (Durham) and Bill Glendinning, Bayview Elementary & Middle School, (North York).